

STRESS AND MANAGEMENT

Stress is a normal part of life, but when it becomes chronic, it can take a serious toll on both physical and mental health. Common sources of stress include work-related pressures, financial difficulties, health concerns, and relationship challenges.

While some stress can be beneficial, like the adrenaline rush before delivering a speech that leads to a successful performance, it becomes problematic when stressors are persistent and negative. Life events like job loss or a loved one's medical crisis can trigger biological responses that, over time, may adversely affect both physical and mental health. Recognizing the difference between motivating stress and harmful stress is key to managing its impact.

Managing stress begins with recognizing these triggers and implementing strategies to cope. Once identified, stressors can be addressed through a variety of approaches that support both mental and physical well-being.

NON-PHARMACOLOGICAL OPTIONS

The American Psychological Association recommends evidence-based tools that are often overlooked but can be highly effective.

ELIMINATE STRESSORS

The level of stress a person experiences often depends not only on the intensity of the situation but also on how the individual perceives and responds to it. While it may not always be possible to avoid stressful situations or solve every problem, there are ways to reduce the stress you feel. One helpful approach is to evaluate whether the situation can be changed, by letting go of certain responsibilities, adjusting expectations, or seeking support from others.

MAKE GOOD NUTRITIONAL CHOICES

The central nervous system releases adrenaline and cortisol when confronted with a stressor, and this can affect the digestive tract. Acute stress may suppress appetite, but cortisol release during chronic stress may cause fat and sugar cravings.

Studies suggest that elevated cortisol levels, when combined with high sugar intake may contribute to the accumulation of visceral fat. This type of fat is closely linked to increased risk for cardiovascular and metabolic diseases. The mechanism involves inflammation triggered by sugar metabolism, which can lead to increased cortisol production and promote fat storage in visceral tissues. Maintaining a diet with a variety of nutrients is key to provide more physical energy to deal with challenges. Using substances like alcohol to suppress the stress response may offer temporary relief, but it does not address the underlying cause of the stress. In fact, relying on substances can lead to serious health consequences and may worsen emotional and physical well-being over time.

RELAX YOUR MUSCLES

Stress often causes muscles to tighten, which can lead to physical symptoms such as tension headaches, back pain, and fatigue. To relieve these effects, consider gentle stretches, massage therapy, or soaking in a warm bath. Another effective technique is progressive muscle relaxation, which has been shown to reduce anxiety.

and support overall mental health. To practice this method, find a comfortable position and focus on one muscle group at a time: Starting with the lower body is commonly recommended. Inhale deeply while contracting the muscles for five to ten seconds, then exhale and release the tension quickly. Pause and relax for at least ten seconds before moving to the next group. A variation of this technique, known as passive progressive muscle relaxation, skips the tensing step. Instead, you mentally picture each muscle group and concentrate on releasing tension in that area.

PHARMACOLOGICAL OPTIONS

In cases where stress leads to more severe symptoms, like anxiety or depression, pharmacological options may be considered. Medications can provide relief but should be used under the guidance of a healthcare provider and often in combination with behavioral strategies for best results.

SSRIs, a class of prescription antidepressants, treat anxiety or depression and work by reducing the reuptake of serotonin, making more available to the body. Serotonin helps regulate mood, behavior, and memory. Common SSRIs include citalopram (Celexa), escitalopram (Lexapro), fluoxetine (Prozac), and sertraline (Zoloft). Common side effects include dry mouth, GI upset, and weight gain. It is important to stay adherent to this medication, as therapeutic effects can show up around 4-8 weeks.

SNRIs may be an alternative option, which works by increasing levels of serotonin and norepinephrine. Examples of SNRIs include duloxetine (Cymbalta) and venlafaxine (Effexor). Side effects of SNRIs may include loss of appetite, anxiety, weakness, and increase in blood pressure. Like SSRIs, patience is important as SNRIs take 6-8 weeks to have their full therapeutic effect, though some may notice initial improvements sooner.

Combining pharmacological therapy with behavioral strategies such as counseling, lifestyle changes, and stress-reduction techniques can enhance outcomes and support long-term mental wellness.

References:

1. <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/tips>
2. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/kitchener-waterloo/september-stress-jennifer-moss-happiness-1.5712784>
3. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/James-Dinicolantonio/publication/319255543_Fructose-induced_Inflammation_and_Increased_Cortisol_A_New_Mechanism_for_How_Sugar_Induces_Visceral_Adiposity/links/5afeb326aca272b5d84abd6b/Fructose-induced-Inflammation-and-Increased-Cortisol-A-New-Mechanism-for-How-Sugar-Induces-Visceral-Adiposity.pdf
4. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/best-medication-for-stress#snr-is>

PREFERRED DRUG LIST UPDATES CAN BE FOUND HERE:

	
ACC-RBHA, DD, ALTCS and DCS CHP	Behavioral Health (Non-Title 19/21)

** Drugs that are not on the formulary will require a PA (prior authorization) request to be submitted**

Reminder for quicker determinations of a Prior Authorization use the ePA link for Our Providers: Please click [here to initiate an electronic prior authorization \(ePA\)](#) request.

This newsletter is brought to you by the Mercy Care Pharmacy Team. For questions, please email Fanny A Musto (MustoF@mercycaresaz.org), Denise Volkov (VolkovD@mercycaresaz.org) or Trennette Gilbert (gilbert@mercycaresaz.org)